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STREETS & SHADOWS

by

Mercedes de Acosta



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STREETS
AND
SHADOWS

By

MERCEDES de ACOSTA

MOODS

ARCHWAYS OF LIFE

STREETS AND SHADOWS

WIND CHAFF

(A novel)

STREETS AND SHADOWS

BY

MERCEDES de ACOSTA



NEW YORK
MOFFAT, YARD AND COMPANY
1922

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1922

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To
Vouletti Proctor Brown
beloved and understanding
friend,
this volume is
lovingly and gratefully
dedicated.



Acknowledgment is made to "Poetry: A Magazine of Verse," for permission to reprint some of the poems in this volume.

“Then let me see you stand free and high up!”

Ibsen’s “*Master Builder*.”

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**STREETS
AND
SHADOWS**

SONG OF FIFTH AVENUE

A LONG thin way

Drawn like a thread through the heart of the city.

Avenue of rich, of poor—

Vibrating with color—

Swaying with humanity

Beating time with the pulse of Life,

Suffocated by the pressure of Life,

Crushed—trampled upon by streaming flows of Life.

Fifth Avenue!

I will write your song in clatter and din,

With tramping of feet,

Endless, ceaseless noise.

I will write your song in sorrow—joy,

In birth—death,

In creation—destruction,

In beauty and ugliness.

I will sing your song in spite of tradition,

Careless of tradition.

I will sing your song of creeds, of races

Dissolved in one—

I will sing your song

In laughter—irony—despair.

My music will come of all time,

Reach all time—

As you have come of all time,
Of all people;
And with the slenderness of your body,
The magic of your will—
Have touched all people.

Washington Square—
White arch rising like the ghost of people long
since dead;
Memory of fragrant flowers—old laces—
Sleigh bells and many traces
Of beauty, love and dreams.
Now only an arch, but a cross gleams
On an old brown building.
Washington Square—
Symbol of the Past,
Conceiver of the long thin thread
Spun from out your heart.
Now then take your part,
Following up the blocks and years.

Watch the weary tramp
Of sweat workers out for lunch;
The emptying of buildings where homes once
stood;
Swedes, Armenians, Slavs come pouring forth,
Merging in the crowd midst stink and sweat,

Sucking in the air for one short hour.
On the corner blooms a flower
Carried in a basket by an Italian
Pushed roughly by an Irish cop,
Who calls them all
“A bunch of stinking Yids.”
Then further up I sing—
Past great shops—great banks,
Clothes of all description—
Shoes, dresses, cloaks, stays,
Jews, Gentiles press their ways
Swarming cross the Avenue.
And over all swings the flag.
From shops with French, German, Italian
names
Hangs the Great American Flag!

Forty-second street—
Like a strange automatic animal
Opening wide his jaws,
And to the tune of a sharp whistle
Spitting forth great masses of Life.
Millions of people rushing over the spine of
the Avenue
Calling the system “civilization.”
While high up loom tall buildings,
Where slender primeval trees once stood,

Bird songs filling the air instead of policemen's
whistles.

But I have said I would sing of your beauty,
too;

So I remember your magic at twilight,
White buildings like winged birds flight,
Flashing thousands of window eyes
Like stars at night.

And the radiance of the sun
Across your face by day;
Dazzling colors—motors—green buses—
Life—life on its way
To death. A funeral passes,
A pauper begs, a child laughs out,
But like ants in long tall grasses,
They pass their way, no one heeding them.

Then churches—all creeds—
(Take your choice)

All spires point to the sky
All vainly try

To show us heaven.

While on the street

The beggars meet
And have no homes.

Then rich houses copied from foreign land;

French Chateaux, Italian palaces,
While within great plates of glass stand
Old master paintings looking out,
Gazing solemnly on the new world.
Then further up more rich houses.
Homes of Jew bankers—rich politicians,
All with too much food and gold,
While sitting opposite in the park are old
Worn out bums, tired of being hungry.
Further up Mount Sinai Hospital,
Chloroform fills the breeze
While in the park from the trees
The scent of flowers.
Then further still “Nigger Town,”
Black faces and brown
Hang from windows and crowd the streets.

So the long thin thread stretches—
Stretches—bends
Then ends.

Fifth Avenue ends and so my song;
But over its pavements the blood of Life
Is flowing on!

LITANY OF HANDS

HANDS—millions of hands
Drawn across the brow of Life,
Brushing away the sweat of Life,
Or drooping listlessly by the side of Life.

Hands of dreamers—passive—white,
Hands of scientists—knotted—steady,
Hands of surgeons—strong—sure,
Of poets—sensitive—frail,
Hands of suicides—nervous—faltering,
Of laborers—muscular—unfaltering,
Proclaiming sometimes a lost child of genius.
Hands of thieves—avaricious—sneaky;
Hands that destroy flowers—cage wild things.
Hands of children
Groping—reaching into the future.
Hands of old people—quiet—tired out,
Weary of touching life
Of upholding tumbling castles and dreams.
Hands of traitors—extended—deceiving,
Fingering everything with treachery and lies.
Then magnetic hands—hands of healers,
Of people who understand;
Hands of compassion, of forgiveness,
Hands that carry the burdens of the world
Like the hands of Christ!

“FOR RENT”

THREE is something terrible
about houses marked “For Rent”
and poor devils sleeping in the streets,
and wanting homes.

I have never slept in the streets
or in the parks,
but if I do
I hope I shall never see
empty houses marked “For Rent,”
because it might make me bitter,
and hateful to my fellow creatures.

NEW YORK

BUILDINGS endlessly high
With skeletons of steel—
Pointed—square—grotesque roofs—
Thousands of windows
Like chains of eyes
Ever watchful—ever condemning.
Long lines of avenues—
Ugly straight streets—
Brick—faded yellow and red—
Stone—soiled white and brown—
Flaming letters and signs over everything.
Then noise—noise—noise—
Clanking of street cars,
Roaring of elevated trains,
Throbbing of motors,
Shuffling feet—
People—people—people—
Distorted congestion of humanity—
But over all a hideous loneliness—emptiness—
And everywhere—suffering . . . suffering . . .

REST

You standing against the doorway—
The boyishness of your slender figure
Framed in the arch—
Making a semi-halo around your head—
Dragging out the shadows—
Like the wings of fairy butterflies
Across your face.

Then we two
Entering into the house—
The glowing firelight
Leaping up to greet us—
The intimacy of familiar things
Crowding about us—
Making our voices low—
While lodging a tenderness in your eyes
Creating another warmth within the room.

Then we turning low the lamps—
Creeping to bed—
You coming to my room—saying
“How wide do you want the window?”
Then bending low—kissing me—
Turning at the door—
Eyes brilliant with vision—
And with your strong brown hand
Blowing me a kiss to sleep.
Then I sinking back
Knowing I shall taste a rest
Unutterably sweet!

NEWSPAPERS

NEWSPAPERS circling in the wind.
Newspapers torn and dirty,
Trampled under feet,
Flung aside.
But perhaps somewhere on their sheets,
For someone in the world,
There is printed the beloved's name.

RESTAURANT

INSIDE

SHRILL hum of voices—forced laughter—
Dimming the plaintive notes of violins.

Warmth—glittering glare of lights
Thrown back—

Reflecting in a hundred mirrors.

Women—gaudy gowns—flash of jewels on
breasts—

Hurrying waiter—overturned milk bottle—

Discarded chicken—untouched food

Tossed away.

Bored faces—

A woman yawns—life is not very gay. . . .

OUTSIDE

SHRILL roar of the city

Dimming the silence of the night.

Cold—amber glare of city lights

Thrown back—

Reflecting on the streets.

A woman in rags holding her baby to her breast

Dreaming of milk—praying for discarded food

Tossed away.

Despairing face—

The woman coughs—life is not very gay. . . .

A BIRD IS LIKE FREEDOM

BEAUTIFUL are flags
Straining—whipping in the breeze.
But I say Freedom is more beautiful
And not like flags—
Which are ever held—restrained.
Beautiful are trees—rocks—valleys—
mountains—flowers—
But they are not as beautiful as Freedom
And are bound to roots and earth.
But I say a bird is like Freedom—
Swift—light—beautiful—
And soaring into the sky
May die in high altitudes
But perishes of its own free will.

LEANING OUT OF WINDOWS

SQUALID, dark room—
Torn, soiled wall paper
With a broken cheap picture
Hanging crookedly on the wall.
Smell of greasy soup—cabbage—
A tin tea kettle
Spitting feebly from a small stove
Where fumes of gas escape
Stifling all the air.
A disordered bed—
Under the dirty sheet
Three greasy children—
Brows moist—feverishly whining—
Beating away flies and mosquitoes.
From the window,—
Watching the elevated screech past
The parents hang
Gazing on the street.
Far out they lean
Like expert acrobats—
For only leaning far out of windows
Gives them balance
And forgetfulness.

CHURCH

INSIDE

All kneeling
From the same cup drinking wine—
Blood of Christ.

OUTSIDE

Spitting—chewing gum—cursing—
The same lips that tasted wine—
Blood of Christ.

NOTRE DAME

NOTRE DAME—

Like a melancholy dreaming poet leaning
against the sky

How much Paris owes to you.

How much owes to your slim fingers—

Ghost-like—tapering up—

Tenderly caressing

The dark velvet cloak of summer nights.

How much owes to the delicate network of lace

Worn across your face—

The mysterious color of everchanging rainbows

Sunk in depths of magic glass in the radiance
of your eyes.

Paris owes this beauty all to you.

To you, music of your voice

The inspiration of peace and prayer!

ECHOES

(*To my mother*)

A BIRD sings outside my window.
I hear his notes throbbing like a heavenly
pulse,
Vibrating—clear.
Suddenly he has stopped singing and flown
away—
But I still hear his song.

Your words are like that.
You are dead
But I still hear your words.

THINGS I UNDERSTAND

IN the church
The priest is preaching a sermon—
The minister is preaching a sermon—
I do not understand what they are saying.
But I go out into the street perceiving
Shadowed patterns cast by the sunlight—
I see the grey chalk of hunger lined on the
beggar's face—
The look of hopeless futility in the street-
walker's eyes—
The glorious flame-like rhythm of a child's body
As it leaps in motion across the street.
These things I understand.

MANHATTAN

FOREIGN cities have age and tradition
to draw from—
You have only your youth.
But I love your youth
And the diversity of your profile
Outlined against the sky—
And your feet—ever wet—
Recklessly wading in the sea waves.

NEW YORK

DAY

COLD grey houses—ugly streets—
Iron—steel—mud—
Torn-down buildings—dust—dirt—
Congested traffic
Like swarms of mighty ants paralyzed together.

NIGHT

Fairy city touched by stars
With tall ghosts holding candles.
Spirit of dreams with onyx shadows
And the kiss of the moon across its face.

NIGHT AND RAIN

(Fifth Avenue)

SLEEK streets—

Pavements slippery—shimmering—wet.

A slow drizzle—

Distorted buildings

Leaping from the greyness—

Their edges sharp—strong—

Then dimmed—lost.

Amber signal lights

With rays sucked through the mist—

Changing green—red—mist again.

Dark motors

In funeral procession

Proclaiming the mighty city's order—

Creeping slowly along—

Stopping—creeping again.

While on the pavements

Yellow reflections of lamps—

Crimson blood spots of tail lights

And black shadows of men and women—

Apprehensive—hurrying along—

Stripped of all personality

With only their pale, white faces

Showing them up—

Reporting their existence

From out the blackness of the night.

TO MY MOTHER

You were so essentially yourself;—
So true to all real things—
Touched alike by beauty of soul and face,
A rare flower of the old Spain.
I know indeed
I shall not see your like again.

UNDERSTANDING

FROM out the congested crowd
I see a tear worn face.
Our eyes meet—
Suddenly—
Without a word we are comrades. . .

I have lost him in the crowd—
But not before he has known
I would like to have kissed
His tear worn face.

“SOYEZ RAISONABLE”

ACROSS the square a crowd—
In the midst two figures—
A woman dressed in rags—starved—drunk—
A man dripping in poverty
Helplessly trying to lead the woman home
 who fights him off.
In the witchery of the night these tragic figures
Stand out in hopeless dignity of despair,
While shadows of various emotions
Chase recklessly across the face of the crowd.
Suddenly a policeman appears—
Well fed—fat—rosy—
Dispersing the bystanders
He jerks his belt across his swelling belly—
With an air—pleased—satisfied—
Twists his moustache to the crowd
And to the drunken woman says—
“Circulez Madame” et “Soyez raisonable!”

BANNER, FLAME AND SONG

I WILL build a mighty banner with dazzling colors

Holding it high before me.

I will heap burning fagots on my shoulders

So that far away my flame will be seen;

I will sing a glorious song

Whose words and rhythm will always be the same.

On my banner will be inscribed the word "Freedom."

My flame will be the star of Freedom;—

My song will ever be the song of Freedom.

TO MY MOTHER

QUIET is your voice.
Men say you will never speak again.
Yet, is it not your voice I hear,
Your voice vibrating through my heart
Teaching me better than I am,
Showing me humility and Love,
Making me believe in God?

CHANGE

SOME one for whom I had a great passion
Now sleeps in this room with some one else—
There are traces of me in many objects—
The books I gave and fingered are lying
on the shelf,
And an old picture whose land I lived in and
whose hills I sped,
Is still hanging facing my old bed.

So times change—
But love goes on—
Like a bird that is dead
Yet whose song,
Lives on forever.

MATERNITY

IN the Italian quarter on the East side,
A woman trembles in pain delivering a baby.
In the room four other children howl,
While on her face is a look of hopeless resig-
nation.

There is no haste to get well because it will
all happen again.

Up town

A woman trembles in pain from an abortion,
There is haste to get well and it will
never happen again.

DAY LABORER

MASSIVE shoulders
Convulsed with muscle—
A bright red blouse
Standing out like a scarlet wound,
Across the breast of the snow.
Easy swing and handling of the shovel;
Brown face and hands
Proclaiming warmer skies.
Brown face and hands,
Sad—alien—amidst Northern whiteness,
And a voice and song that sing of
Southern lands.

STAMP COLLECTORS

(Avenue Marigny)

SITTING on the chairs

Their bodies curved and crooked—

Like ancient turtles crouched on jagged rocks—

The stamp collectors gather.

Old men—little boys—

Weird women—quaint, spoiled little girls

 with wistful eyes—

All breathless and intent upon their business.

Through their fingers slip little squares of
color—

Blue—green—red—gold—

New stamps—faded, old—

And rare ones beyond measure.

Fugitively they move—

These stamp collectors—

And with lustful eyes

Watch the bidding of their neighbors.

While sometimes—in their midst but all un-
noticed

A stamp flutters to the ground—

Exuding the breath of alien people

And the romance of countries far away.

TIDES AND CLOUDS

TIDES ebb, then come again,
And with the last refrain
Of the dying wave,
I know I hear your name.
Deep in the turmoil of the foam
It seems to be;
Borne across the water,
Thrown back from out the sea,
And at last striking shore
And reaching me!

In the fringe and outline of the clouds
I see your face;
A drawn profile against the space
Of Infinity.
While in my heart the pain
Forever and forever the same
Of your memory!

STRANGE CITY

O STRANGE city.

City wherein I am a stranger.

I look down at you from this high window

And watch the contour of your face

Pressed against the night sky.

I see a tower rising in the distance,

Pale, thin, with a faint light flickering

from its eyes—

Like a tired woman

Wearied with incessant clamoring of voices

she does not understand.

I see a clock whose face stands out

silvery and ghost-like,

Passing its slender hands across its face,

And feeling the breath of time as it slips

between its fingers.

I see black roofs

Like crouching beetles,

And endless streets

Fading into the night.

Then far away and deep within the distance—

Looms a corner of the sea.

Strange city with your harbor, streets and
houses,

I am lonely. Befriend me!

MY CHRIST

CHRIST is roaming on the street,
I feel His glance as I meet
The passer-by. And yet they say
Christ is dead and passed away.

I would not have Him living more to me
Than this Christ I daily see;
The love of Him in every ray of sun,
The good of Him in each and everyone.

GOOD-BYE ON THE BOAT

EARLY morning—

Rising.

A dead, hopeless feeling about my heart.

Going out—cold air on my face—

Crossing the ferry with the others

And at the boat

Finding you in the crowd.

Hundreds of faces—

Pushing humanity—

Staggering porters

Burdened with heavy luggage

Groping up the gangway.

Voices everywhere—

An onrush of meaningless—empty words.

Confused orders—repeated directions.

You and I standing in it all

Helpless—hopeless—

Trying to seem indifferent before the others,

And like the rest saying

Trivial—futile things.

A shrill whistle—

I calmly saying

“I think we had better go.”

Kissing you lightly—coldly—
And with the others leaving you.
Going off the pier
My throat closed with pain—
Eyes dim—staggering just a little.
Then standing in the front of the ferry
Trying not to seem crushed—
With the confusion past
The hideous realization
That you have really gone
Comes over me—
The desperate regret
For all the trivial things I said,
And because I did not kiss you
The way I wanted.

INFINITE

**IF I should love you less
You would still be my life.**

**If I should love you more
I would have no need of God.**

LOST IDEAL

To have returned and found you changed.
To have left you trembling from my touch—
With smouldering fires in your eyes—
Now to find your flame
Burning at another's altar.
Yet how strange—
With this change
No storm of jealousy rages me.
Only a sad regret—
That in all your words of fidelity
Sworn so true—
In our friendship now—
So strained—so new—
The truth stabs me—
I am a finer thing than you!

FAITHFULNESS

You are changed.
I love you for your change—
Your progress—mastering of yourself.
But I do not love you the less
For all you were.
You must remember
It was *that* you
Whom I first loved.

BRAVADO

You are forever tossing your glove
Into the face of Life—
Daring—challenging—
Waiting with madness in your eyes
For the returning blow.
In reality—
You are nothing but a small child
Parading about
On a little stage of your own,
Longing for some one to love you.

FUTURE HOPE

ONE day

There will be no such words as evil and good,
While compassion—struggle will be understood;
Pestilence—horror off Life's path steer,
And flaming horses crush down fear.

The Angel of Courage will ride this way
Making blacker night and lighter day;
Upholding love, slaying hate,
Flinging wide the bolted iron gate
That imprisons Freedom—kills all Light,
Puts bars on windows—stops the flight
Of all wild things. Then God coming with
burning eye—

Tearing a jagged opening in the sky,
Shaking the earth with fury layer by layer,
Leaving only forgiveness—understanding there!

AM I ALONE?

I AM alone—yet—
I feel I am not alone.
How do I know that a hundred unseen spectres
Are not pressing round me?
Or that a dear dead friend
Is not kneeling at my side
With lips touching my hand
And mutely trying to speak my name?

REALITY

TONIGHT

Understanding has leapt between us.
For the first time we have emerged together
From out the mist
And become real people to each other.
O! how strange—
The gate swinging upon this reality
Found a knife within your hand
To fling at me.
Striking my heart
It has not lessened your reality—
But it has spilled blood
Upon which—
Some day I may slip.

COMRADE

I AM gone beyond being your lover—your
mistress.

That was when I did not understand Love—

Now I understand it—

And so, I am your comrade.

FLOWERS, DEVILS AND SAINTS

I WOULD caution you only to be yourself.
If you are a lily
Do not paint your petals so as to be a rose,
Or if you are a devil do not try to be a saint;
Since you may find
That devils are made mostly from the stuff of
saints,
And that roses lose their color
Fading sooner than lilies.
So I tell you again
Be always yourself.
Through being yourself
You will convince
You have a right to be yourself.

AM I MYSELF?

THE world is passing through me.
All life with noiseless key
Turns the lock of my soul passing therein.
Sometimes while sitting pondering
Crossing the back of my brain
A shadow passes.
A shadow of some sorrow far away.
Twisting my heart, I feel this sorrow more than
they
Who first created it.
O tortured brain of mine
That still is me yet can divine
The anguish of all others;
That must share day and night
Sadness of the world and delight
In joys I do not know.
Am I some other self? If so—
Am I myself, or am I but the wind
Of all destinies that have been and still will be,
Vibrations of sorrow and joy
Expressing themselves through me?

EXHAUSTION

If you should come to me tonight
And say "I love you after all"
Could I, who am so tired hear you call,
Or would it not surely seem
Just the echo of a dream?
If you should come to me tonight
And say "I love you."

CRYING OUT

SILENCE—silence—
Apprehensive stillness.
Then from out the greyness of the night
A sad prolonged whistle
Like the frenzied wailing of a soul
Twisted—deformed—despairing—
Realizing all horrors
Forever dreaded.
Like the wailing of a soul—
My soul—
Crying out to you
In the silence—apprehensive stillness
And greyness of the night.

INSATIATE

I AM not afraid of love—
Nor am I afraid of its consequences.
Only am I afraid that in meeting love
I may remain insatiate—
And the spirit still long for something greater.

OUR RETURN

AFTER our wanderings

We have once more come back to your house.

I remember how last we saw it—

In a ghost-like mist of apple blossoms—

The moist lips of springtime pressing on your
face.

Now we have returned to see the fruit.

Red apples—like flaming sunsets—

Trembling on the trees—

Dropping at your feet.

So in four long—short months—

I witness the whirling evolution

In the season's changing of your life.

Where I saw you gathering blossoms

I now see you bearing fruit.

The fruit of Truth—

And beauty of measured fearlessness.

FUNERAL PROCESSION

A FUNERAL is passing.
In the coffin
Lies the body of a man or woman—
The sex does not matter now—
Since the soul understanding and sexless
Has gone its way.
Or perhaps it is in our midst—
And watching the man who lifts his hat
And bows his head so reverently.

LOST FAITH

THE confessional is empty,
Worn—mellowed—
In glorious old colors
Is the marble where the penitent has knelt.
Slowly I approach and marvel
At the place where I too once knelt.
Then reverently approaching—
(I—who no longer believe)
Bend and kiss the marble
Where those who still believe
Will come and kneel.

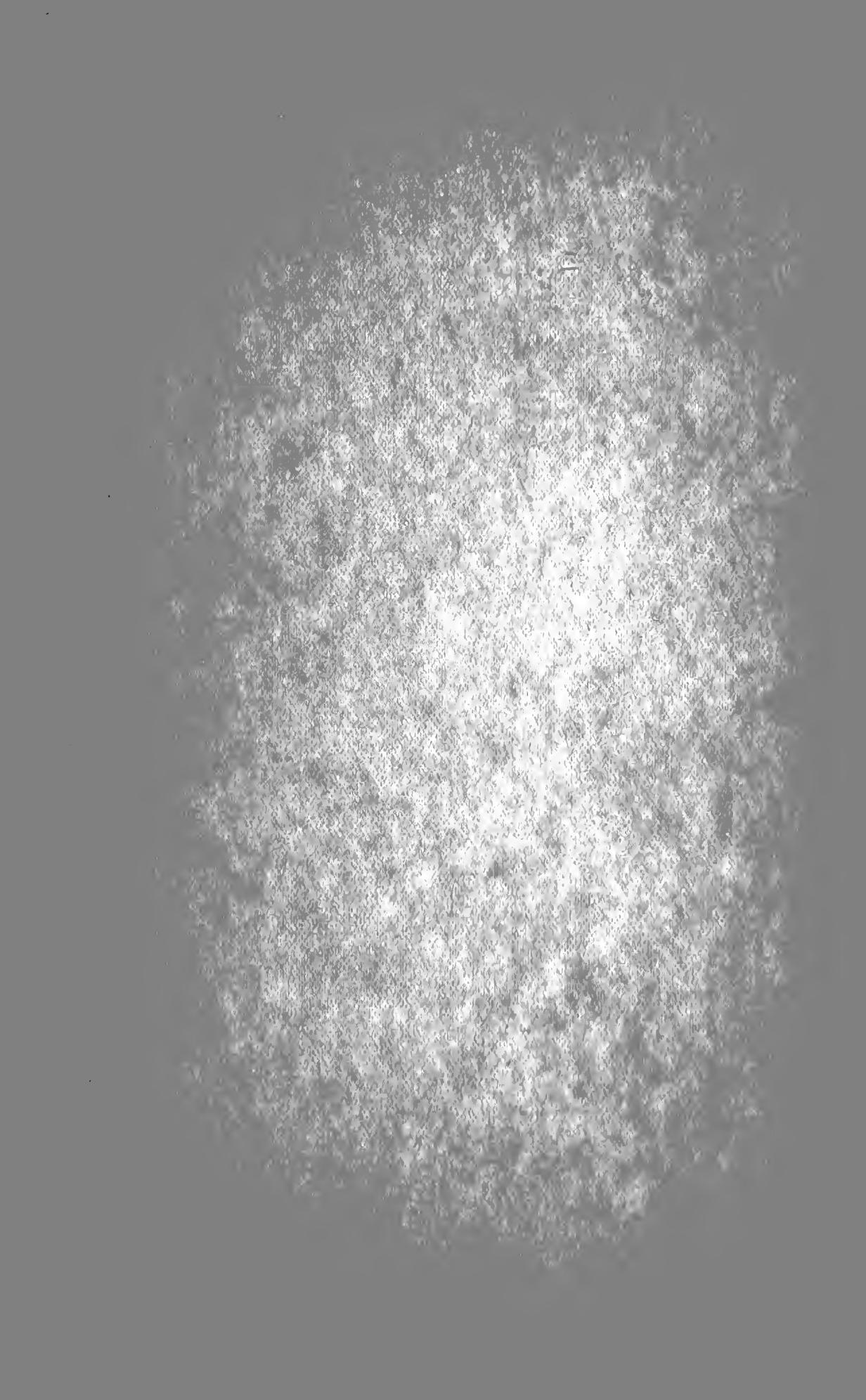
PARIS SLEEPS

PARIS sleeps,
Encircled in loving arms
Safely the wives rest in the night.
While on the streets—
Lonely and diseased
The harlots march looking for their prey—
And praying for the day!



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